



# Siobhan Parkinson

*Irish Author candidate for the  
2020 Hans Christian Andersen Award*



## Biography

### Siobhán Parkinson

Siobhán Parkinson grew up in various parts of Ireland but has lived all her adult life in Dublin. She studied English and German at Trinity College Dublin in the 1970s and followed her primary degree with a PhD. She has worked in academic publishing, educational publishing, software, an organisation supporting homeless people and various commercial publishing companies as a writer and editor. She was joint editor of *Bookbird* for some years in the early 2000s, and before that was editor of *Inis*, the Children's Books Ireland magazine. She is also a translator of children's books, from German, and is and is currently publisher at Little Island Books, a children's publishing company she founded in 2010.

She is best known as a writer for children (though she has also written novels for adults), and has won numerous awards for her books; several of her titles have been IBBY Honour Books. She writes mostly in English but also occasionally in Irish (Gaelic). Her books have been translated into dozens of languages, including most recently Japanese and Brazilian Portuguese. Her most recent book for children is *Miraculous Miranda*.

She was Ireland's first Laureate for Children's Literature (2010-12) and during her term of office she worked to bring Irish children's literature to the world and books from other cultures to Ireland. She instigated the Laureate Summit, a biennial meeting of children's laureates and reading ambassadors from around the world at the Bologna Children's Book Fair.

She visits schools and especially enjoys working with children on their writing.

She lives in Dublin with her husband, who is an artist. They have one son and a baby grandson.

## Statement

Siobhán Parkinson made her debut as an author with a picturebook for young children entitled *All Shining in the Spring*. A forthright yet gentle account of the death of a new baby at birth, it signalled what has become a hallmark of Parkinson's fiction – her ability to handle serious themes with an exquisite lightness of touch and deep respect for the emotional intelligence of young people. She has written over twenty-five books, including historical and contemporary realist fiction, ranging from young adult novels to stories for younger readers. Her work is characterised by social and psychological realism infused with warmth, wit, humanity and a sense of playfulness particularly evident in her experimentation with form. Her historical novels (*Amelia*, *No Peace for Amelia* and *Kate*), set in times leading up to and after the foundation of the Irish state, feature strong female protagonists whose personal stories foreground perspectives that were formerly marginalised and contest the notion of any hegemonic narrative of nation. While her work is socially conscious, addressing with nuance and complexity important themes such as youth homelessness (in *Breaking the Wishbone*), domestic violence and family break-up (in *Bruised* and *The Moon King*), the plight of asylum seekers (in *The Love Bean*), at the centre of all her novels are the rich interior lives of her characters, superbly rendered through her clever use of form. In many of Parkinson's novels, storytelling is central to young characters' growing understanding of themselves and of the world around them. Metafictional techniques (for example, in *Bruised* and *Second Fiddle*) and intertextuality (in *Four Kids Three Cats Two Cows One Witch (Maybe)*, *Sisters- No Way!*, *Blue Like Friday* and *The Love Bean*) draw attention to the construction of narrative and the interconnectedness of stories, creating layers of meaning that reward multiple re-readings and require consideration of different perspectives. Parkinson writes in both Irish and English languages and has also translated books from other languages. She has won numerous awards for her work, including the White Raven Award three times (for *No Peace for Amelia*, *Kate* and *Four Kids Three Cats Two Cows One Witch (Maybe)*). *Something Invisible* and *The Moon King* were selected as IBBY Honour Books. Parkinson served as Ireland's first Children's Laureate from 2010 to 2012 and since 2010 has been a publisher of high-quality children's books with Little Island Publishing. The breadth of genres, variety of form, and range of voices in Parkinson's fiction, as well as her facility with languages, attest to her versatility as an author of calibre who illuminates life in its many dimensions and stretches boundaries in children's literature.

Ciara Ní Bhroin  
*Lecturer in English*  
*Marino Institute of Education*

# Irish stories

Bill Lockwood Stone Meeting, Staffordshire

**H**ow, at age 13 – or any age – do you explain to well-meaning people that we do not use titles like Miss or Mister ‘because we’re Friends, you see’? And how do you reconcile yourself to your own ‘unworthy thoughts’ and try to be a ‘better person’? Add to such familiar experiences the less familiar – a mother arrested campaigning for votes for women, or a close friend whose brother is in prison fighting for the nationalist cause – and you have a sense of the themes and issues explored in two novels by bestselling Irish children’s writer Siobhan Parkinson.

*Amelia*, the first of her two ‘Quaker’ novels, is set in Dublin in 1914 before the outbreak of the first world war. It is authentic both historically and in its links with Quakerism at the time – the characters have genuine Irish Quaker surnames. But it has also been made very accessible for young (probably early teenage) readers. Plot and character are both very strong, and the issues the characters confront arise naturally and convincingly.

For example, the plight of Kelly, a local man locked out of his employment for refusal to sign anti-union papers, leads to a natural, realistic and impassioned dialogue between Amelia and her mother about the relationship between poverty and personal responsibility – a complex and difficult issue likely to reverberate still in the minds of Friends, young and old.

The second of the two novels, *No peace for Amelia*, begins when Amelia is 15 and the first world war is almost two years old.

A brief historical note provides some useful background, to the growth of nationalism in response to Home Rule, the consequent formation of warring private armies such as the Ulster Volunteers and Irish Volunteers, and the latter’s involvement in the Easter Rising.

But against this background the scene is set for a series of events which create some dilemmas in Amelia’s life that are no less relevant today.

In the course of the story Amelia’s boyfriend goes off to fight in the great war, to the shock of his Quaker family, and her best friend’s brother, Patrick, becomes involved in the Easter Rising and seeks refuge with Amelia’s family.

As a consequence of what she has experienced Amelia commits herself to the cause of peace with the assertive conviction typical of a 15-year-old. She declares to Patrick that she’s neither a nationalist nor a unionist but a pacifist, to which he replies:

‘Anti-war?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ah sure, aren’t we all anti-war at heart. I mean, none of us likes fighting and killing.’

‘It’s not enough to be anti-war at heart,’ said Amelia virtuously.

‘What does that mean, now?’ asked Patrick, in a rather patronising tone that Amelia didn’t like.

‘It means,’ she said firmly ‘that you have to work for peace, not just have a distaste for war.’

There can’t be many young Quakers who haven’t, in one form or another, had to address this very issue in recent weeks. The context changes, but the search for an appropriate response goes on.

*Amelia* became a number one bestseller in Ireland, and was shortlisted for the Bisto Book of the Year Award after publication in 1993.

*No peace for Amelia* also received widespread acclaim in Ireland. It is unfortunate therefore that the novels are not better known in this country, a fact that can be attributed to the reluctance of major booksellers to import from Irish publishers.

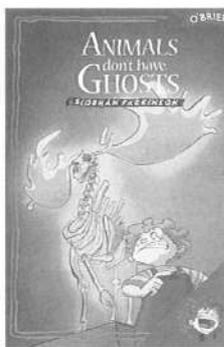
*Amelia* and *No peace for Amelia* are published by The O’Brien Press, Dublin, and are available from the Friends Bookshop at Friends House, (phone 020 7387 3601). ☼

## Close-up: Living Irish Authors 6: Siobhán Parkinson

Amanda Piesse

IRISH writing for children has experienced an undeniable stretching of the limbs in the past 25 years. The provision of a newly robust and resonant literature for an increasingly sophisticated and cosmopolitan young readership has apparently arisen spontaneously from within the cadre of Irish authors; both qualitatively and quantitatively, their response has not been found wanting.

Siobhán Parkinson's novels, and her occasional, acerbic outbursts in the press, epitomise the alertness and intelligence of current writing for young people in Ireland. Even her earliest books, for younger children, mark out the kind of trajectories that her later novels follow. What Pat Donlon (1995) has described as her 'ironic and laconic view of life' is in evidence in the dry wit of *The Dublin Adventure* (1993) and *The Country Adventure* (1994); and her commitment to



the intellectual capabilities of quite young children is evident in her recent rewriting of both pieces (as *Animals Don't Have Ghosts* and *Cows are Vegetarians* respectively) in the first person.

“ Her unflinchingly clear-eyed account of the death of a newborn infant is as much a tribute to the emotional capabilities of the very young as it is the epitome of poetic economy ”

Similarly, Parkinson's charge (Power, 2000) that 'we forget that children are human beings who have the same emotions as adults' resonates repeatedly through her writing. Her unflinchingly clear-eyed account of the death of a newborn infant is as much a tribute to the emotional capabilities of the very young as it is the epitome of poetic economy. 'When you are five,' Parkinson has commented (*ibid.*), 'your emotions are even darker... because you cannot say directly what you are thinking. You don't have the words yet.'

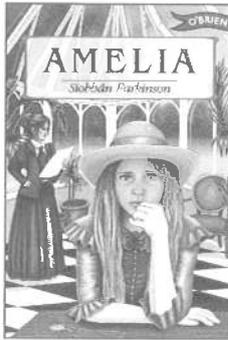
The crux delivered in the very title of this book, *All Shining in the Spring: The Story of a Baby who Died*, demonstrates in little the rhetorical tension (between taut, economical evocation and uncompromising direct statement) that underpins this extraordinary portrait of a grieving family. The short sentences and simple



statements throw into relief the deeply moving moments of direct speech (''He's only a baby,' said Matthew sadly to his mother. 'He didn't even have a chance to see you'') that brilliantly articulate the complexity of feeling beneath the surface of the prose. The book's taut style renders perfectly the tensions between the turmoil of inarticulate grief and the simple truths both adults and children are forced to use to clothe it.

In the early companion novels *Amelia* and *No Peace for Amelia*, Parkinson creates a double diptych. The broad movement from the first to the second is from innocence to experience, while the compared and contrasted world views of the two central protagonists check and balance each other continually across both novels. *Amelia*, initially the complacent, middle-class, much-loved daughter of a highly successful merchant father and a politically progressive (if somewhat dotty) mother, is in stark opposition to sharp-featured, sharp-tongued, sharp-witted Mary-Anne, the no-nonsense maid-of-all-work.

The collapse of Amelia's father's business forces a reassessment of hitherto unquestioned beliefs. Uncompromisingly, Parkinson confronts Amelia, and the reader, with new angles on quotidian commonplaces: is it wrong to take leftovers from a well-fed family to feed one that's starving? Do the well-off have the right to a large family, and the impoverished a moral duty to contain themselves? If strongly held



political beliefs land a person in gaol, is it proper, or even possible, to discriminate morally between the individuals concerned on the grounds of one's own particular point of view? Running beneath these issues, apparently spontaneously generated by the day-to-day narrative of *Amelia*, so feat is its interweaving of the mundane with the momentous, is Parkinson's notion of innate comprehension fettered by incomplete articulation.

Parkinson never allows History to dominate this history of Amelia, because that is not how we perceive life at the moment we are living it. She never allows the novels to become a vehicle for overt didacticism of any kind. The protagonists learn what they learn and observe

“ The protagonists learn what they learn and observe what they observe in that fragmented way that real people do, and very often they cannot articulate what they learn

### Selected Siobhán Parkinson titles

*The Love Bean* (2002)

*Call of the Whales* (2000) – Bisto shortlisted; RAI shortlisted

*The Moon King* (1998) – Bisto Merit award; IBBY honour; RAI shortlisted

*Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (maybe)* (1997) – Bisto Merit award

*Sisters ... No Way!* (1996) – Bisto Book of the Year

*All Shining in the Spring* (1994) – Bisto shortlisted

*Amelia* (1993) – Bisto shortlisted

All published by The O'Brien Press, Dublin

what they observe in that fragmented way that real people do, and very often they cannot articulate what they learn. Parkinson's unerring ability to capture outward detail in a few deft sketches carries the dualities within these novels to a structural level too. The outward descriptions, as in real life, are fully fashioned, but the authorial rendition of the inner knowledge being attained by the characters is, crucially and cannily, often allowed to remain incomplete.



The structural notion of the double-take reaches its apogee in the award-winning *Sisters ... No Way!* which consists of two first-person accounts of the same story. The novel has two front covers, designed so that the

reader has no clue which account to read first, or to which to give precedence. The contrasting idiolects, Ashling's maternally mundane and materialistic, Cindy's laced with literary reference and unapologetic arrogance, each irritate the reader with splendid impartiality. The deficits of character revealed by each narrator's account are checked and balanced by the alternative point of view.

But again, this novel is more than the sum of two parts. The names of Cindy and Ashling, the acquisition of a step-parent by each protagonist, and the handsome young stranger bringing a lost shoe to the home of the fleet-at-midnight object of his desire all invite the reader to think again and think harder. Barely credible at times, tedious Ashling and over-studied, self-dramatising Cindy teeter on the brink of caricature. Life is not a fairy-tale, but, if Doc Martens can be allowed to replace glass slippers (and bunny slippers to replace Doc Martens), then the reader will learn to discriminate between intelligent reading and over-reading. Less ostensibly, the overhasty marriage hard on the heels of Cindy's mother's death, the funeral baked meats coldly furnishing forth the wedding tables and driving Cindy into black-clad self-contemplation, the perverse redemptive aunt, all suggest (to this reader anyway) that Parkinson has more than one prince in mind. We might

think that we construct our own narratives, our own accounts of our own lives, Parkinson seems to be saying, but there is always someone else writing their version of us, and, furthermore, there is no escaping what Harold Bloom has called the 'anxiety of influence', the fact that there is no narrative new under the sun, that if we do write a narrative of self, it will inevitably be read in terms of narratives that already exist.



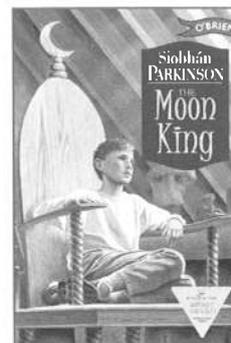
Of those to whom much is given, much is required, and Parkinson's next novel pushes the parameters of literary type back further still. Considered by many to be her best novel, *Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (maybe)* is witty in all its aspects, simultaneously parodying and pushing forward the time-honoured genre of the adventure story. Replete with Blyton-esque picnic (lost, on this occasion), snobbery (here regretted, eventually, and overcome) and obligatory odd adult to replace absent parents, the novel transcends its form by a deft interweaving of the protagonists' own rewriting of self by their own telling of stories. The peculiar Irishness of island writing too is invoked here: the intricacies of Eilís Dillon's masterly exploration of insularity in all its forms in *The Island of Ghosts* are recalled, and the realignment of fantasy and reality at the moment of the thunderstorm strongly recalls Patricia Lynch at her best in the later chapters of *The Turf-Cutter's Donkey*.

But the shift in register required to understand the function of the structure of this novel aligns the ideas more closely with adult writing like Jeanette Winterson's ('Listen. I'm telling you stories') or Allende's short stories. The real cleverness of this novel subsists in the risks Parkinson takes, for example making some of the most revealing moments the funniest – as when Dympna draws attention to the functionality of naming. Dympna says that her cow is called Dympna; Beverly says 'Really? Isn't that confusing?' and Dympna replies, 'No, I don't think so. I call her Dympna. She doesn't call me anything.'

“Boundaries are continually called into question”

Boundaries are continually called into question: those between fantasy and reality, between fact and fiction, between madness and sanity, between articulation and communication. It's rather sad, though, that a passage towards the end of the novel articulates this so explicitly, because the patterning of the novel provides the answers to the conundrum for the alert reader, and it's one of the few moments in any of her novels that Parkinson giftwraps a submerged truth.

In *The Moon King*, my own favourite, Parkinson revisits the notion of inarticulateness and the understated, powerful simplicity of *All Shining in the Spring* re-emerges in a newly robust form. Young Ricky's abused, damaged personality, which manifests itself psychologically by traumatised silence, is rendered brilliantly by a fragmented interior monologue, usually preceded by a slightly



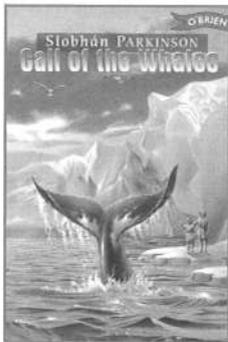
fuller account from a third-person narrative that is already shifting towards Ricky's own idiolect. This treatment of speech imitates a general motif in the novel, that of degrees of anxiety. The foster family Parkinson creates is not a perfect safe world, and other characters are troubled too. It is never quite clear which children are fostered, and which are birth-family. Ricky's trauma is placed in the context of degrees of trauma, his erratic behaviour one particular form of several forms. The shifting in and out of register to produce Ricky's voice is a particular form of this nuancing, and it brings the preoccupation home powerfully. Ricky's inarticulacy can be described by the narrator/grasped by the reader if it's described in regular language; the narrator can represent it partly through a shift to narrated stream-of-consciousness; but the isolation his damaged world-view imposes on him can be felt only by letting him speak internally to himself, in still more fragmented speech, in a typeface that alienates it from the rest of the text.

*Breaking the Wishbone* demonstrates a similarly accurate ear for idiolect. Parkinson's experiment in direct speech with an extreme sparseness of detail is a departure from her usually vivid description, but the voices bring the characters and their surroundings starkly to life. Most poignant here are the occasional flashes of humour, the juxtapositions of despair and desperate attempts at some kind of normality, of 'gaiety transfiguring all that dread'. In repatterning

her writing to her purpose, Parkinson takes the risk of freeing the characters from being reported; yet again, it is in telling their own stories that they are able to take control, to a limited degree, of their own futures.

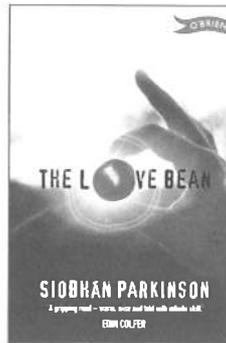
“  
Breathtakingly  
elegant narrative  
stream”

*Call of the Whales* is the closest Parkinson has yet come to a crossover book; the marvellous sense of nostalgia, the evocation of what she has elsewhere (Parkinson, 1999) called ‘forgotten, joyous corners of the imagination’, dominates the yearning to reconnect with the narrator’s own past and sense of wonder. The circularity of experience is caught fleetingly with an Eliotesque recapitulation at the end of the novel. Again, the notions of coming of age in an alien place, the necessity of understanding and accepting alternative points of view, the simultaneous pull towards home and towards a new and independent self, form an unobtrusive undercurrent to the breathtakingly elegant narrative stream. The form here is a traditional one, but Parkinson’s prose is



at its most lyrical, her examination of relationships at its most understated. With this novel, the traumas of adolescence are a matter for reflection, not for immediate experience, and the settled nature of the form in which

she writes here underscores the notion of recollection in tranquillity.



In *The Love Bean*, Parkinson’s most recent work, previous ideas of doubling, of intertextuality, of time present being bound up in time past, are revisited. Irishness at its most ancient and at its most present is shown to have the same personal and universal preoccupations: individuality, insularity, tensions between generations and social groups and between expectation and resignation. The dialogue between the young people and between the generations is perfectly observed, and the reverberations between the two

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stories carefully crafted. There is a sense here, not just of stories informing each other, but of the very narrative of history informing and reforming itself.

Parkinson stoically resists writing a novel where history dominates individuality. In allowing the daily confrontations with self and other to dominate both stories, in allowing self-conscious accounts of the formation of self through reading to creep in, she draws attention again and again to the question of what makes us who we are,

“  
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where we find the language of the self, what things make us simultaneously different and the same.

Since starting to publish in the early 1990s, Parkinson has been extraordinarily prolific, and the breadth of genre and variety of voice she has assimilated to the body of her work shows a highly intelligent facility with form and an uncompromising attention to the detail of her prose. Her novels are increasingly intellectually demanding, I think, and increasingly resonant with the preoccupations of literatures beyond those of Irish writing for children, but they rarely allow

their cleverness to subordinate their proper function – that illumination of real life so that we see it all at once strange and new, and yet with a shock of recognition.

#### References

- Donlon, Pat (1995) ‘Siobhán Parkinson’ in Standley Bergen (ed) *Twentieth-Century Children’s Writers* Detroit/London: St James Press
- Parkinson, Siobhán (1999) ‘Show Some Respect’ *The Irish Times* (5 Oct 1999): 11
- Power, Suzanne (2000) ‘Seriously Speaking’ (interview with Siobhán Parkinson) *SQ Food Magazine* (Aug/Sept 2000): 16–18

# Little Island – Big Plans

Siobhán Parkinson

Siobhán Parkinson discusses the recent creation of Little Island, a new imprint of New Island Books, dedicated to publishing translations of quality children's literature.

**L**ITTLE ISLAND is a new imprint of New Island Books, and we plan to publish our first batch of books for children and young teenagers in the spring of 2010.

Intensely fond as I am of Boston, I am also rather partial to Berlin. But our children are hardly aware that Berlin even exists, much less that it might have something to offer them – and this bothers me.

back in its bottle now, for sure, I said to myself, making a tentative phone call to New Island to see if they were still interested. Interested? they said. Of course we are interested. And where are those translated books of yours? *Clunk!* I went again, right out on the floor. This time I had the good sense to hang onto the telephone receiver, though. Ahem, I said, from my supine position. Well, I said. Mm, I said.



Or at least in their head.

Our plan for now is to publish in three main areas: books in translation, new books by new and old(ish) Irish authors, and some

## Planned list for spring 2010 (subject to change):

*Old Friends: The Lost Tales of Fionn Mac Cumhaill* by Tom O'Neill (right)

*The Cryptid Files: Loch Ness* by Jean Flitcroft

*Rabbit Giants* by Burkhard Spinnen (translated by Siobhán Parkinson)

*Over the Wall* by Renate Ahrens (far right) (translated by Siobhán Parkinson)

*The Lantern Moon* by Maeve Friel (reprint)

*Jimmy, Jimmy* by Mark O'Sullivan (a long-awaited new title from the acclaimed writer)



That is how I came to approach New Island with the idea that children need translated books, so that they can get some sense of how life is lived in non-English-speaking countries. Quite right, they said. We've been thinking that ourselves. (Well, that wasn't *exactly* what they said, but it's close enough for this story.) When I picked myself up off the floor, I muttered a few names and titles and then I ran away jabbering in fear at the genie I had unleashed.

And then came the R-word. (You know, it's on the radio. It means people can't afford their TV licences.) Oh, well, that genie can go

But of course, New Island said, waving merrily as it went sailing by, if we are going to do children's books in translation, we may as well do children's books altogether, don't you think? After all, it's good to offer children books by Irish authors too, isn't it? Being already stretched out on the floor, I couldn't do my *clunk* bit again, so this time I sat up and waved back. Of course, I said. What a brilliant idea! Ahoy!

And then I began to cast about looking for books, and behold, they came pouring out of the bilges, oodles of them. It seems everyone I met had a children's book in their bulkhead locker.

reprints of good books by Irish writers that have somehow slipped out of print, and our list for the spring will probably consist of a mixture of titles in those categories. For the moment, we are concentrating on quality fiction for pre-teens (9–12) and early to mid-teens (13–16), but that's more a preference than a policy decision. We are committed to quality, but open-minded on just about everything else, so anyone with a really great idea for a book is welcome to come aboard and talk to us. (By us, I mean me: [sparkbenn@gmail.com](mailto:sparkbenn@gmail.com).)

Siobhán Parkinson is an award-winning author.

## PARKINSON, Siobhán

**Nationality:** Irish. **Born:** Dublin, 23 November 1954. **Education:** Scoil Mhuire gan Smal and Loreto Convent, Letterkenny, Co. Donegal, Leaving Certificate 1972; Trinity College Dublin, B.A. in English and German 1976, Ph.D. in English Literature 1981. **Family:** Married Roger Bennett in 1978; one son. **Career:** Assistant editor, Royal Irish Academy, 1980-83; freelance editor, 1983-87; editor, C.J. Fallon Ltd. (educational publishers), 1987-89; head of technical writing, CBT Systems, 1989-95; editor and writer, Focus Ireland (a major Irish charity working on behalf of homeless people), 1995-97; managing editor, Town House publishers, from 1998; writer and freelance editorial consultant. **Awards:** Bisto Book of the Year shortlist, 1993-94 and 1995-96; Bisto Book of the Year 1996-97. **Address:** 7 Kenilworth Park, Dublin, 6, Ireland.

### PUBLICATIONS FOR CHILDREN

*Off We Go ... The Dublin Adventure.* Dublin, O'Brien, 1992.  
*Off We Go ... The Country Adventure.* Dublin, O'Brien, 1992.  
*The Leprechaun Who Wished He Wasn't,* illustrated by Donal Teskey. Dublin, O'Brien, 1993.  
*All Shining in the Spring,* illustrated by Donal Teskey. Dublin, O'Brien, 1995.

### PUBLICATIONS FOR YOUNG ADULTS

*Amelia.* Dublin, O'Brien, 1993.  
*No Peace for Amelia.* Dublin, O'Brien, 1994.  
*Sisters ... No Way!* Dublin, O'Brien, and Nimot, Irish American Book Company, 1996.  
*Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (Maybe).* Dublin, O'Brien, and Nimot, Irish American Book Company, 1997.  
 "Damson Jam," in *First Times*, edited by Robert Dunbar. Dublin, Poolbeg, 1997.

### Other

Editor, *Home: An Anthology of Modern Irish Writing.* Dublin, A.&A. Farmar, 1996.  
 Editor, *A Part of Ourselves: Laments for Lives that Ended Too Soon.* Dublin, A.&A. Farmar, 1997.

### Siobhán Parkinson comments:

As a child I wanted to be a writer "when I grew up." Being a child I wanted to write for children, naturally enough. My parents thought this an amusing little idea.

Then I did grow up (well, sort of), but by now, I rather agreed with my parents that wanting to be an author was an amusing little idea. To tell the truth, the feeling that I mightn't be all that good at it was really what kept me for so long from embarking on a literary career, together with a horror of all the competition out there and of the exposing of one's inner self that writing involves. I suppose I needed to do a lot more growing up before I was ready to take that plunge.

It's an old cliché, isn't it, that people come to writing for children when they have children themselves. When my son was born, even when he started to take an interest in books, when I started to read to him, when he started to read back ... none of these things moved me to want to be a children's writer. It never crossed my mind. But then something happened in our family, and I desperately needed a book to help my son (then five years old) to understand what was going on, but no such book existed. That's when I wrote my first children's book.

What happened was that I discovered, late in my second pregnancy, that the child I was carrying was not going to survive birth. My small son had followed the progress of the pregnancy eagerly and was very excited about this big event in our lives. So how to break this dreadfully disappointing, even disturbing news to him? Being a literary sort of person, my first instinct was to reach for a book, but the books I found, although I was able to bend them to my purpose, were quite unsuitable for our unusual (but not unique) situation. I found the available books on death for children were sentimental and rather poorly produced, and none of the ones I could find at any rate dealt with such a taboo idea as baby-death. In the end, I wrote the book I was looking for myself.

The publisher I sent it to did eventually publish it several years later (as *All Shining in the Spring*), but in the meantime they called me in and announced that they thought I was a children's writer, and asked me when I could produce my next manuscript. I laughed. Amusing little idea, I thought. And that was how I came to be a children's writer. When I am feeling particularly spiritual (which is only occasionally), I like to think that little Daniel brought gifts with him, though he didn't stay long, and one of those gifts was my becoming a children's writer, because if it hadn't been for him, I don't think I would ever have dreamt of doing such a thing.

\* \* \*

Although her first book was for young children and was followed by several other successful books for the under tens, it is Parkinson's writings for young adults which have brought her recognition and success. This writer's sense of irony and laconic view of life is obvious even in her early work such as *The Leprechaun Who Wished He Wasn't*. For most Irish people leprechauns belong in the folklore of past times or as tacky souvenirs to be sold to gullible tourists. From the first sentences of the book you know that this is a gentle send-up of another icon: "Laurence was fed up with being a leprechaun. He was tired of sitting under a boring old rainbow, guarding a mouldy old crock of gold and making endless shoes. He wanted to be a human being."

Parkinson's skill at telling a good story in clear, sometimes funny, almost always compelling prose is evident in most of her books. In a mere sixty pages of text and images in *All Shining in the Spring* she tells poignantly and honestly of the devastation and lack of comprehension of a young boy at the untimely death of his baby brother. In a narrative that is neither harrowing nor maudlin she simply states the reality. With one of the loveliest book titles ever, we know that Matthew will recall each year his short-lived baby brother as he and his parents visit the flower-studded grave "all-shining in the spring."

In the late 1980s and 1990s in Ireland there has been a dramatic change in both the number and quality of books published for children and young adults. Irish people have a great interest in and obsession with history, so it is not surprising that in their

writings, many of the best contemporary authors eventually are drawn to this genre. Parkinson too has given us some interesting work in this area with *Amelia* and *No Peace for Amelia*. She draws an accurate and compelling picture of Dublin in the 1914-16 period without bogging the reader down in historical detail. When we meet her, Amelia, the daughter of a well-to-do Quaker family, is preparing to celebrate her fourteenth birthday. Against this background is played out the social tensions of a changing society, the rumours of an impending insurrection, and the threat of War in Europe. At its simplest this is a riches-to-rags story of the declining fortunes of the Pim family, and the reactions of all involved. All is changing for the bewildered Amelia as she is deserted by her former classmates and friends, but befriended by the young servant girl Mary Ann. Parkinson is at her best when describing apparently mundane happenings. When Amelia first tries to use that new-fangled invention the telephone the scene in the General Post Office is so written that the reader too suffers the embarrassment of snooty officials, the terror of new technology, the overriding fear of looking foolish.

In the sequel *No Peace for Amelia* we have moved on a little in time—and whilst the family fortunes have not exactly been restored, through diligence and hard work Amelia's father has regained a small foothold on the social ladder. Amelia falls in love and is forced to reconcile her love for the soldier Frederick with the Quaker abhorrence of violence. The divided world of early twentieth-century Ireland is epitomised neatly in the anxieties of the two young women: Amelia, with her young man going to fight for King and country, and Mary Ann, the servant girl, with her brother fighting a very different fight for the cause of Irish freedom. The uneasy alliance and understanding serves as a microcosm of the wider historical and social realities.

Parkinson's young people are refreshingly normal and relatively angst free. *Sisters ... No Way!* is a cleverly conceived flip-over book. Two diaries of two very different young women thrown together by the marriage of their parents, one separated, one recently-widowed, are printed back-to-back. The reader is immediately confronted with the dilemma of which diary to read first and in that choice inevitably becomes embroiled in that sister's particular perspective of the world. This is a clever, thought-provoking book which uses the interplay of the two narratives to counterpoint different life styles. Readers must constantly reassess as they finally come to the recognition that there is no one truth, no one reality, only life as viewed through different eyes. Parkinson has an acute ear for the euphemisms society adopts to hide embarrassment, as when Aishling, the more conservative of the "sisters," rails against her father because he introduces his daughters to newcomers as "My daughters, from before, you know." It is Cindy, the outwardly punk, rebellious daughter who comes the closest to the reality of her situation as she moans confidingly to her diary about her new family: "Not that they're mean or horrible or anything—just plain boring and neurotic and silly and, oh, just not like us. Of course we're neurotic too, everyone is, but I think our neuroses are more creative."

In an author's note at the beginning of *Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (Maybe)*—ostensibly a summer holiday adventure trip to an island—Parkinson gives us a clue to the underlying symbolism of the journey: "In some cultures young people who are approaching adulthood have to undergo some sort of test or ordeal.... They might have to go off by themselves into the forest, for example, and survive on their own initiative. In other

cultures the transition is marked by the older people telling the children the secret stories of their tribe. Once they have these stories, they are no longer children, but grown-up members of the tribe. But no matter what form these ceremonies and rituals take (and in some cultures they are pretty nasty) every child has to make the journey from childhood to young adulthood for himself or herself."

Snobby Beverly, extremely self-contained (at least on the surface), constantly looking down her nose at the local youth Kevin from her sophisticated stance, has her rite of passage when on a cliff edge she suffers an attack of vertigo. In a stunning *tour de force* Parkinson details the panic and fright she suffers and her resigned acceptance of help and ultimately friendship from the heretofore despised Kevin. The catalyst in the story, as in so many young adult novels, is an outsider, an older person—the eccentric and possibly insane Dymphna, rumoured by the mainlanders to be a witch. Her presence haunts the entire book, at first only through the knowledge of the local boy Kevin, but later as a presence felt by all of the four protagonists. Yet the story is well-advanced before we actually get to meet Dymphna as she comes home to her ramshackle cottage to find the four sheltering there from the impending storm. Interwoven throughout the book are the tales told by the young people under the spell of Lady Island, tales that are allegorical, sometimes surprising even the tellers themselves by their unexpected twists and always with the ghost presence of the strange listener. This is Parkinson's most complex and sophisticated book to date and is a story which can be enjoyed at many levels.

—Pat Donlon

## PARRISH, Anne

**Nationality:** American. **Born:** Colorado Springs, Colorado, 12 November 1888. **Education:** Misses Ferris's School and San Luis School, Colorado Springs; Misses Hebb's School, Claymont, Delaware; Philadelphia School of Design. **Family:** Married 1) Charles Albert Corliss in 1915 (died 1936); 2) Josiah Titzell in 1938 (died 1943). **Awards:** Harper prize, 1925. **Died:** 5 September 1957.

### PUBLICATIONS FOR CHILDREN

#### Fiction

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*The Dream Coach*, with Dillwyn Parrish, illustrated by the authors. New York, Macmillan, 1924.

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#### Poetry

*Floating Island*, illustrated by the author. New York, Harper, and London, Benn, 1930.

Reviews... Reviews... Reviews... Reviews...

# LOSS, SEARCH AND DISCOVERY

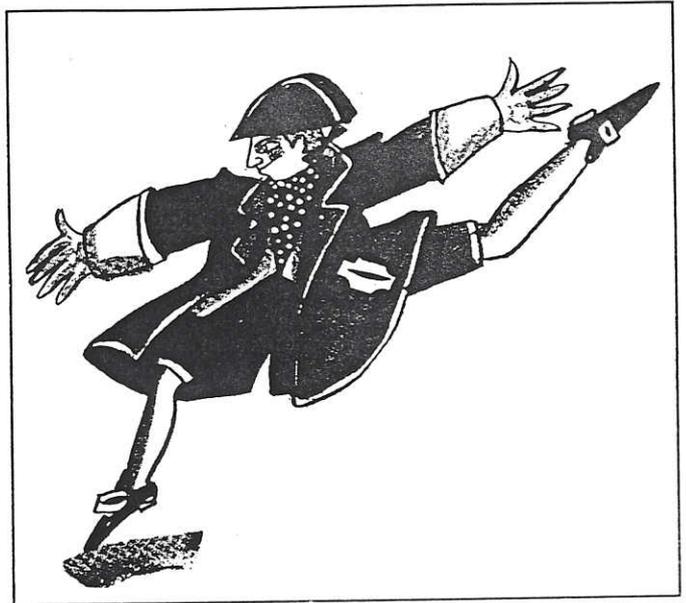
Robert Dunbar on five remarkable recent Irish children's books

Towards the end of Siobhán Parkinson's *Amelia* (O'Brien: £3.99: 0862783526) there is a sentence which encapsulates the principal theme of this engrossing narrative: 'Changed circumstances,' we read, 'had changed her view of what mattered.' As implied here, the emphasis is on the changing fortunes of 13-year-old Amelia Pim, daughter of a Quaker household in the Rathgar (Dublin) of 1914 and, in particular, on her gradual awareness of the triviality of birthday parties, fine clothes and elegant living once the winds of reality begin to blow on the doors of Kenilworth Square. Parkinson's greatest achievement — other than her ability to create credible characters and to tell a well paced story — is to provide, as backcloth, a portrait of an era in Irish social life when all former certainties are under threat. There is talk of an armed rebellion, women are demanding votes, personal prosperity gives way to bankruptcy, the hierarchy of master, mistress and servant becomes destabilized: Amelia's grandmother, dismissing the once magnificent, but now decaying, orangery as 'vainglory' can see beyond a mere architectural detail. The dreams and longings of childhood egoism have to give way to a sterner scheme of things, an understanding with which Parkinson totally convincingly endows her young heroine.

In Jane Mitchell's striking novel *When Stars Stop Spinning* (Poolbeg: £3.99: 1853713201), the 'stars' of the title first appear as dizzyingly glamorous symbols of the excitement which 15-year-old Tony and his schoolmates are certain lies ahead of them as they nonchalantly sprawl on the grass of Stephen's Green; the sterner reality here comes in the form of the consequences of a joyriding escapade and the removal of Tony to a rehabilitation centre. It is a reversal which will dramatically alter Tony and his perspective on the worlds of school, home, himself, since his period of

and a developing relationship with another young centre resident: this is Stephen, also fifteen, also interested in music, but with a life expectancy which will allow of only the briefest fulfilment. Mitchell sketches in the backgrounds of family, school and hospital with sympathetic skill, but the real interest (and the source of the book's power) lies in her portrayal of the intensity of feeling between the two boys. Few teenage novels offer anything like the emotional directness of their first meeting — 'Slowly, not wanting to frighten, Stephen lifted his arm with great effort and leaned it on the bedspread beside Tony's hand' — or the controlled grief of their last.

The first and last encounters of the two heroes of Cormac Mac Raois's *It's Pinbindimdomill!* (Wolfhound: £3.99: 08632-74080) are equally arresting moments, albeit in a story where the prevailing tone is lighthearted, spiced with some excellent jokes. On the eve of his eleventh birthday, Jim Doran finds himself visited by the 13 centimetre tall (and 121-year-old) manikin of the book's title: the seven days they are to spend together will see chaos at home and at school and end in a sharply observed press conference (there is even room for a RTE special correspondent called Stewart Crowe!) which in turn ends in a roaring fracas. Beneath the fun and apparently endless inventiveness, however, there is a view of a child's world which, while refreshingly child-centred, is never coy or sentimental. In line with Parkinson's *Amelia* and Mitchell's *Tony*, Mac Raois's Jim witnesses to the transforming and growth-inducing potential of experience. Pin, he and his twin sister agree as the book closes, 'had certainly changed things for the better', though when earlier this same sister had announced her acceptance of Pin's existence the same Jim 'felt a deep sinking feeling, a sadness as if something precious had been lost.'



Cathy Dineen's illustration for Arthur McKeown's *Robin Hood of the Cave Hill* (Poolbeg: £2.99: 1853712647).

and discovery lies also at the heart of Pat Hynes's *Land of Deep Shadow* (Wolfhound: £3.99: 0863273440), though here the details of the narrative are worked out in the animal, rather than the human, world. Very early in the story, its hero, Packo the hare, is told by his mentor Marsha: 'You'll find yourself by losing yourself' and it is the tragic fulfilling of this prophecy with which events are to be concerned. The motif of the quest provides the structural underpinning of the novel and allows for a succession of highly charged and vividly described confrontations: 'to confront the unknown is to confront the ultimate terror', as a quotation from the shadowy hare epic known as 'The Prophecy of Tuarug' reminds us some way before the forces of dark and light engage on the final battlefield. Although the 'animal story' is a well established genre in children's literature, it rarely manages to combine quite as credibly as it does here the dual role of natural history narrative and allegorical parable: the hares' battle for survival becomes a clear emblem of our own struggle for — and search for meaning in — existence.

Notions of 'struggle' and 'survival' are central once again in

*Chieftain's Daughter* (O'Brien: £3.99: 0862783380), one of the most powerful examples of Irish children's historical fiction to have appeared so far. It is difficult to decide what the greatest merit of the story is. We can choose from its subtly conveyed sense of time and place (the Ireland of fifteen centuries ago), its cast of searingly vivid characters (particularly the interplay of young and old), its deceptively simple language (cloaking a narrative technique which, in teasingly moving from past to present, from first person to third, enforces the reader's continuous adjustment of perspective). Above all, perhaps, we can surrender to the almost mythic dimension of the novel's themes: friendship and enmity, passion and hatred, trust and betrayal, all reconstructed in the tale which Dinn Keene, the ancient chief whom we meet on the book's opening page, relates not just for our benefit, but for the newly-arrived 'Patrick of the Pens, the great Man of Speech.' At the heart of his story — and we mean both Dinn's and McBratney's — lies an evocation of young love kindled and young love killed, a tragedy numbing in its unfolding: like the young Dinn mourning his lovely Frann we end by hearing 'only the souging wind in the young tree.'

## Bibliography

Amelia	1993
The Leprechaun Who Wished He Wasn't	1993
No Peace for Amelia	1994
All Shining in the Spring: The Story of a Baby Who Died	1995
Sisters...No Way!	1996
Sestre -- ni šans!	2004
Seserys -- jokiū būdu!	2007
Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (Maybe)	1997
The Moon King	1999
Breaking the Wishbone	1999
Call of the Whales	2000
Cows Are Vegetarians	2001
The Love Bean	2002
Fara e dashurisë	
Animals Don't Have Ghosts	2002
Second Fiddle: How to Tell a Blackbird From a Sausage	2005
Second Fiddle: How to Tell a Blackbird From a Sausage	2007
Something Invisible	2006
Kate	2006
Kate	2008
Blue Like Friday	2007
The Henny Penny Tree	2008
Dialann Sár-Rúnda Amy Ní Chonchúir	2008
"Bruised"	2011
Mairíóisce	2011
Spellbound	2012
Heartshaped	2013
Alexandra	2014
Fionnuala	2014
Miraculous Miranda	2016
Rocking the System	2017

## Ten most important titles

Amelia	1993
Sisters...No Way!	1996
The Moon King	1999
Breaking the Wishbone	1999
Call of the Whales	2000
The Love Bean	2002
Something Invisible	2006
Blue Like Friday	2007
"Bruised"	2011
Mairíóisce	2011
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